

# A GLANCE AT SHAMANISM IN SOUTHERN THAILAND\*

by

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This paper gives a brief description of Thai shamanism as practised in our neighborhood on the island of Phuket, Thailand. It is based upon two months (May-June 1975) of observation and follow-up interviews. Included is a description of the guardian spirits, the spirit mediums, and sessions with the spirit mediums.

## 1. The Guardian Spirits of Nakorn Sitammarat

Every provincial capital in Thailand has its guardian spirits who protect the city from danger and evil. Nakorn Sitammarat has nine such spirits, who are believed to act through our neighborhood spirit mediums. The chart below lists the names and specialized functions of the guardian spirits of Nakorn Sitammarat.

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GUARDIAN SPIRITS	SPECIALIZED FUNCTIONS
1. Khruu Waat พ่อเต่าควาต	Commands the other spirits
2. Phothawchaajmyang พ่อเต่าชายเมือง	Gives advice
3. Phothawsongmyang พ่อเต่าทรงเมือง	Helps the sick and injured
4. Phothawsyamyang พ่อเต่าเสอเมือง	Helps the sick and injured
5. Cawmaelakmyang เจ้าแม่หลักเมือง	Prevents bad pregnancies
6. Phothawphraanbun พ่อเต่าพรานบุญ	Casts out evil spirits
7. Phothawphraancit พ่อเต่าพรานจิตต์	Foretells the future
8. Phothawsit พ่อเต่าสิท	Casts out evil spirits
9. Phrayaalindam พระยาอินดำ	Casts out evil spirits

The guardian spirits can be further distinguished from each other. Khruu Waat, the ancestor and teacher of all the others, has the most strength and power. He usually comes once a year at the annual celebration in honor of Manora, a character from the Jataka tales, who is much revered in southern Thailand. Otherwise, he delegates his authority to the other eight subordinate spirits.

Of these, Phothawchaajmyang, his grandson, is the most powerful, and Phothawphraancit is the most humorous. Unquestionably, the most violent is Phrayaalindam. With his predisposition for fire, he extinguishes candles in his mouth and crushes lit joss sticks in his hand. Cawmaelakmyang, the only female spirit, represents the pure blood of the first-pregnant women sacrificed in a fertility rite at the founding of Nakorn Sitammarat. Phothawsyamyang, Phothawphraanbun, and Phothawphraancit are all fond of Manora and frequently perform gestures from the manora folk dance. The remaining two Phothawsongmyang and Phothawsit come least frequently.

Although each has a specialized function, the guardian spirits all have the ability to give advice and explain life's events, foretell the

future, control future events, cure illnesses, chase away ghosts, and exorcise evil spirits. In Section 3.3 these functions are illustrated with actual cases.

## 2. The Spirit Mediums

Of the two spirit mediums we observed, one is female, the other male. The female Ying was born in Phuket in 1912. Her family, which included several manora performers, had moved from Nakorn Sitammarat several years earlier.

In 1951 Ying's brother who had been suffering from a neck injury for over a year consulted a shaman in Phuket. He was instructed to build a spirit house for the guardian spirits of Nakorn Sitammarat. Although they did reside in this spirit house, these spirits never considered Ying's brother to be a suitable candidate for a medium.

A year later Ying saw herself offering rice to these same guardian spirits in a dream. The next evening Phothawchajmyang came to her at dusk. By 1957 she had served as a medium for all of the guardian spirits except Phrayaalindam who does not like women.

During the annual ceremony that year, some plastic flowers fell on a pillow in front of the spirit house signifying that the last guardian spirit Phrayaalindam wanted to come. Ying then began her search for a male medium. She finally chose her nephew Chai in 1965, and Phrayaalindam came to him at the annual ceremony. To date, Chai has served as a medium for four other spirits. As Ying grows older, Chai will gradually serve as a medium for all nine. Ying is now 63 and Chai is 43.

The mediums claim to have no control over which spirits enter their bodies. We have seen as few as one and as many as five in one evening. They also claim not to remember what they did while acting for the spirits. Ying and Chai believe that they would die immediately if they refused entry to any of the guardian spirits.

## 3. Sessions with the Spirit Mediums

### 3.1 Setting and Objects

The sessions take place three evenings a week in the dimly-lit front room of a typical Thai house. The window shutters and door are closed for privacy.

A red and gold spirit house is enshrined on a five-foot wide wooden altar. Around the spirit house are the following objects which frequently appear during the sessions: (1) a four-foot long wooden sceptor with gold gilding used horizontally for calling the angels from all four points of the compass and vertically to stir potions, (2) a mask used for performing the manora dance, (3) liquor, herbs, roots, and coconut water used for driving out infection, and (4) flowers, incense, powder, and cherry soda used for creating a sweet, fragrant atmosphere inviting to the guardian spirits.

Beneath the altar is a chalice containing: (1) a large red candle called thiankhrui (เทียนครู) to draw forth the guardian spirits, (2) a knife to symbolically cut out evil, (3) betel nut to cure minor maladies, (4) phuu (พู่) leaves to relieve aches and pains, and (5) Chiangphraa (เชียงพร้าว) leaves to draw out evil spirits.

Behind the chalice is a white ruffled pillow where the spirits rest before entering the mediums. To its left are two bowls. One contains short, slender red candles called thianyaam (เทียนยาม). They are used for examining a person's body, particularly his eyes, to see if evil spirits still reside. Their wax is dripped into water to make it holy. The spirits also stare into their flame to divine the future or to focus on a problem and its solution. The other bowl holds six folded scarves worn by some of the guardian spirits.

### 3.2 Entry of the Guardian Spirits

Every session begins with a spirit entering the body of one of the spirit mediums.

Ying sits cross-legged facing the thiankhrui silently reciting the names of all nine spirits. She slowly rubs her face with powder and her hands and back with perfume. She bows with her palms together, first in the direction of Wat Chalong (วัดฉลอง), the most-revered Buddhist temple in Phuket, and then to the spirit house above. She runs her hands

up the sides of the candle, past the flame and up to her face three times. She sits quietly with her palms together in front of her face and then cups her hands in her lap. She continues staring into the flame of the thiankhruu, her mouth protrudes, and her head gradually lowers closer and closer to the flame. Her head begins to move from left to right, at first almost imperceptibly, and finally in a gentle rhythmic movement. Her eyes close, and she begins breathing deeply, clearing her throat and making requests of the attendant. He pours her some cherry soda and places a lit thianyaam in her right hand. She stares into its flame with glazed and bulging eyes, her left hand on her left hip. Through her, one of the guardian spirits is now ready to deal with one of the evening's cases. This entire procedure usually takes about five minutes.

Chai goes through essentially the same procedure with a few variations. He first removes his Buddhist amulets. Although shamanism is not incompatible with Buddhism, the power of the Buddha images is considered to be greater than that of the guardian spirits and could prevent a spirit from entering the medium's body. Phrayaalindam, who is generally the first to enter Chai's body, arrives more violently than the others. After staring at the flame of the thiankhruu for about a minute, Chai begins to inhale and exhale rapidly. Suddenly his head shakes furiously from left to right and his teeth rattle. The rapid head movement which lasts for about 30 seconds slows down into a gentle rhythmic sway. He continues to breathe deeply making guttural noises, growling, and occasionally breaking into a stylized laugh. His eyes are half-closed and slightly rolled back. After he has sipped some soda and stared into the thianyaam, he too is ready to turn to one of the cases at hand.

### 3.3 Clients and Treatment

Although there is no fixed fee, people who come to see the guardian spirits generally make an offering of 10 to 20 baht, a bottle of cherry soda or a package of joss sticks. If the spirit's help was of major importance in a person's life, he or she may donate a large sum of money, place some thin sheets of gold gilding on the shrine, or bring an offering such as a pig's head to the annual ceremony.

Many people come seeking advice on day to day issues involving child rearing or disputes with spouses or neighbors. Others want explanations for life's events. An interesting example involved a successful local businessman. His coffee shop was located near a natural tourist attraction, the 4-Branched Coconut Tree, which had been destroyed by high winds the night before. Confused and distraught, he wanted to know whether he had done anything to offend the tree spirit. Phothawchaajmyang assured him that he had done nothing wrong. Instead the time had simply come for the spirit to leave the tree. His original good fortune would return provided he make an offering of red paper, flowers, joss sticks, and candles at the tree site.

The future was the concern of a couple eager to have a child, a student anxious to pass a test and a young man desperate to find a job. However, a winning lottery number is the prediction most frequently requested. Here, the guardian spirits joke, tease, equivocate and often speak in riddles such as "1bird, 2 eyes, and 3 heads".

Occasionally a guardian spirit is asked to control future events. A man unjustly accused of drunk driving and manslaughter was about to be tried. Phothawchaajmyang assured him during repeated visits that events in court would be controlled to reveal his innocence. The man was later acquitted.

The majority of cases involve minor maladies such as headaches, backaches, aching joints, sore throats and unhealed wounds. Most patients require only one session, and generally they have consulted a physician unsuccessfully beforehand. The usual treatment involves massaging the ailing body area and applying phuu leaves which have been warmed in the flame of the thiankhruu. The area might be further treated by running a heated knife over it, dripping melted candlewax on it, blowing on it or rubbing it with powder or holy water. In accordance with Buddhist tradition, each action is performed three times to pay homage to Buddha, his teachings, and the community of Buddhist priests.

If a malady is particularly painful and persistent, several guardian spirits will come to administer more intensive treatment over several

sessions. We witnessed two such cases. A middle-aged woman hadn't been able to eat for three weeks since her business partner tried to poison her food with wood shavings. A 20 year-old woman's legs were still numb from the knees down after two months of injections at the hospital.

The treatment involves two basic actions both of which are aimed at drawing out the evil spirits causing the pain or infection. The first is repeated stroking with a knife, *chiangphraa* leaves, the scepter, flowers, joss sticks, and/or a scarf. The stroking is downward from where the pain or infection is localized to the big toe or thumb. The second action is repeated sucking of the localized area and the toe or thumb using holy water or liquor as an astringent. Before sucking, the medium touches a knife or his thumb to the roof of his mouth to prevent the evil spirits from entering his body. The spittle from the sucking is collected in a small metal pail and cut through with a knife to kill the evil spirits. The door is kept ajar to allow the fleeing spirits easy escape. In addition, the guardian spirit may spray liquor over the entire area which has been stroked.

The guardian spirits also deal with people haunted by ghosts. For example, a young girl in the neighborhood was continually screaming and crying in the middle of the night because she saw ghosts attacking her. The parents who had taken her to three other shamans to no avail were ready to move out of the neighborhood. In desperation, they consulted the guardian spirits of Nakorn Sitammarat. Phrayaalindam told them that their house was built over a former Muslim cemetery, and the spirits of the dead were offended. He advised them to make a conciliatory gesture by placing betel nut and tobacco on the wall alongside house. Their daughter's nightmares stopped immediately thereafter.

Finally, a number of exorcisms have been performed by the guardian spirits, but we have yet to witness one.

# MONKS AND HIERARCHY IN NORTHERN THAILAND

by

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and

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One of the most perplexing problems in Buddhist studies involves the fact that historically the Theravada monkhood has been found to have an organizational structure in many societies, but the *Vinaya*,<sup>2</sup> or ancient code for monastic behavior, gives no basis for such ecclesiastical

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- 2) *Vinaya*: one of the three basic holy books of Theravada Buddhism, containing the 227 rules governing monk's behavior. It also includes detailed commentary on each rule. This text is the foundation of monastic life,